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Benders, J.G.J.M.; Benders, J.F.

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Quid sunt ‘marce sterlingorum’ fabricate apud Vollenho? A numismatic puzzle in the diocese of Utrecht at the beginning of the thirteenth century¹

JOS BENDERS & JEROEN F. BENDERS

AROUND 1233 or shortly afterwards, an anonymous author wrote the chronicle *Quedam narracio de Groninghe, de Thrente, de Covordia et de diversis aliis sub diversis episcopis traiectensibus* (A narration about Groningen, Drenthe, Coevorden and all kinds of other matters during the reign of several bishops of Utrecht).² This chronicle contains a passage on bishop Diederik (Dirk) II of Ahr-Hochstaden or Van Are (1197/1198–†5.12.1212), who started his reign heavily in debt:

*creditores Romani et Senenses ab ipso instanter per litteras papales exegerunt large III milia marcarum sterlingorum et CCC marcas, quas contraxerant et mutuaverant illic duo illi novi electi, sui antecessores*³

‘The Roman and Sienese creditors immediately demanded with papal letters the payment of well over 3300 marcs sterling that the two newly elected, his (sc. Van Are’s) predecessors, had borrowed’.

The bishop succeeded in paying these debts with:

*III milibus marcarum sterlingorum et CCC, quos ipse apud Vollenho fabricari fecerat*⁴

‘3300 marks sterling, which he had made at Vollenhove’.

This passage suggests, and has been so interpreted by historians, that the bishop had coins minted in Vollenhove.⁵ This was a stronghold built during the reign of bishop Godfried of Rhenen (1156–78) on a plateau on the eastern shore of the Zuiderzee, to safeguard the

¹ An earlier version was read at the Ostniederländisches-Nordwestdeutsches Kolloquium zu aktuellen Fragen der mittelalterlichen Numismatik, Münster, 25 November 2006. We are indebted to various participants, Peter Ilisch, Marcus Phillips and Professor Peter Spufford for their comments on earlier drafts.

² H. van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen, Drente, Coevorden en allerlei andere zaken onder verschillende Utrechtse bisschoppen* (Hilversum, 1989). The citations are from this edition; the English translation is ours.

³ Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, pp. 22–3, par. 12: 21–4 – see the Introduction, pp. XIX, XXXI, on the persistent tradition of the wrong passage *et tres marcas* instead of *et trecentas marcas* (CCC/III⁶). The two newly elected predecessors were Arnold I of Isenburg (May–June 1196 to †April 6 or June, 1197) and Dirk I of Holland (May–June 1196 to †August 28, 1197), who were rivals to the episcopal chair.

⁴ Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, pp. 30–1, par. 16: 24–5. This passage only refers to the papal curia, not to the Sienese bankers. On p. XIX van Rij notes that the oldest and most accurate copy, ‘U’, dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, has the enigmatic *seu turribus quas* for *quos*. Van Rij convincingly unravels this as the result of interpretations and reinterpretations on the part of users and copyists. In the same way the gloss *seu tribus* became *seu turribus*.

⁵ E.g. J.M. van Winter, ‘Het opdringen van de graaf van Holland’, in C. Dekker, P. Maarschalkerweerd and J.M. van Winter (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de provincie Utrecht tot 1528* (Utrecht, 1997), pp. 181–6 at p. 184.

frontier with Frisia.⁶ These coins would have been the then current copies of short-cross pennies minted in England. No such pennies are known to exist from the diocese of Utrecht. The question thus arises how to elucidate the passage in the *Narracio* – what is meant by *marce sterlingorum*?



Fig 1: Twelfth century Flanders.

RELIABILITY OF THE *NARRACIO*

The first question is the reliability of this chronicle in matters of finance. It closes in 1232, twenty years after the death of bishop Diederik. In all likelihood, the author was a Frisian clergyman, perhaps an abbot, who had been in the retinue of bishop Wilbrand of Oldenburg (1227–33).⁷ The *Narracio* shows a fascination with the finances of the bishops of Utrecht. The author's precise knowledge of expenses and revenues indicates that he must have had access to financial data stored in the episcopal archives; he might even have been the treasurer of bishop Wilbrand.⁸ It has been argued that he used a lost Utrecht chronicle for the first part of his narrative. The continuation, starting in 1226/7 at the very end of the reign of bishop Otto II of Lippe (1215–26), was based on the author's own experience, probably partly as an eye-witness. This section is more extensive and detailed, and deals almost exclusively with events in the northern part of the Netherlands.

⁶ For the early history of Vollenhove, see J.F. Benders, 'Uit de schaduw van het kasteel: Vollenhove van de 12^{de} eeuw tot omstreeks 1400', in J. Mooijweer (ed.), *Vollenhove, stad en vermaarde zonen. Negen opstellen bij de viering van 650 jaar stadsrecht*. Publicaties van de IJsselacademie nr. 180 (Kampen, 2005), pp. 17–42.

⁷ In addition to the introduction to Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, see also C. Pijnacker Hordijk, *Quedam narracio de Groninghe, de Thrente, de Covordia et de diversis aliis sub diversis episcopis Traiectensibus*. Werken van het Historisch Genootschap, Nieuwe Serie no. 49 (Utrecht, 1888), pp. XII–XXVIII and A.M. Braaksma e.a., *Quedam narracio de Groninghe, de Thrente, de Covordia et de diversis aliis sub diversis episcopis Traiectensibus. Een verhaal over Groningen, Drente en Coevorden en over allerlei gebeurtenissen onder verschillende Utrechtse bisschoppen* (Amsterdam, 1977), pp. XIV–XXVI.

⁸ Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, p. XV, gives examples of the author's financial expertise. In the charters dating from the reigns of Diederik and Wilbrand, almost nothing can be found on financial matters.

For the period under consideration the value of the *Narracio* as an historical document depends partly or even largely on the value one attaches to the supposed source, the otherwise unknown Utrecht chronicle. The evidence from charters supports the reliability of the *Narracio* in this respect. Three surviving documents testify that Bishop Diederik Van Are had (or rather: inherited) debts in Rome and Siena. On January 31, 1204, Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), after several postponements of payment and the sending of a legate (1201) to bishop Diederik, ordered the bishop of Liège to call upon his colleague in Utrecht to repay a loan of 1250 marks. The creditors were four Roman citizens and two Sieneese merchants and their, now deceased, business partners.⁹ It seems very likely that Van Are, five and a half years after he became bishop, still had to pay an instalment or part of the loan. To annul a threatening excommunication, he had to repay the said sum in three portions in Ypres, within one year of receipt of the letter from the bishop of Liège.¹⁰ Beyond doubt, Pope Innocent needed the support of the money-lenders of Rome and Siena. Four years later, on February 7, 1208, Innocent wrote to the bishop, the archdeacon and the scholaster of Tournai to lift the excommunication of the bishop of Utrecht, after he had taken an oath to obey the papal orders. The addressees were also instructed to take care that bishop Diederik paid his creditors.¹¹ Of the two Roman and two Sieneese money-lenders mentioned in 1208, one from each city was mentioned in 1204 as well, which suggests that the same loan is concerned. These papal documents corroborate the statements in the *Narracio*.

The *Narracio* also contains some information on the irregular sources (as opposed to regular ones, like tolls) of Diederik's revenues. Internal strife in 1202 and 1203 involved the looting of the district of the Veluwe and the merchants of the wealthy city of Deventer on the east bank of the river IJssel. In 1204 the prelate was engaged in a war of succession in Holland, receiving 2000 marks (of an unspecified denomination) from one contestant in May 1204 and, after switching sides, 1000 marks in the autumn from his opponent. Ransoms further contributed to the bishop's war income. Yet another source was provided by a treaty with the inhabitants of the bishopric's previously unruly northern districts. Throughout Diederik's reign, the episcopal revenues exceeded the expenses, so that all the accumulated debts could be paid. As a result, his successor could start with a clean slate. Additional funds were stored in a treasury in the castle Ter Horst, near Rhenen.¹² Tightened financial control during Diederik's reign probably helped to secure the resources. An indication for this is the story of Everwach, handed down by the Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach. Everwach was allegedly appointed by the bishop to administer his property, but fell into disrepute after accusations of fraud.¹³ His adversaries, court officials, would have disapproved of the introduction of this potentially powerful office.

⁹ K. Heeringa, *Oorkondenboek van het Sticht Utrecht II* (The Hague, 1940), no. 563 = G. Brom, *Bullarium Traiectense I* (The Hague, 1891), no. 45 (copy in a papal register).

¹⁰ The *Narracio* mentions the excommunications; Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, pp. 30–1, par. 16: 24.

¹¹ Heeringa, *Oorkondenboek*, no. 583 = Brom, *Bullarium Traiectense*, no. 48. The pope mentioned the same issue in a letter published by F. Kempf, *Regestum Innocentii III papae super negotio Romani imperii*. *Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae XII*, n. 21 (Rome, 1947), pp. 340–1, no. 146. This letter has been dated on the basis of the one of February 7, 1208.

¹² Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, pp. 24–31, par. 14–6, pp. 34–5, par. 18: 13–7. R. de Graaf, *Oorlog om Holland 1000–1375*. *Middeleeuwse studies en bronnen XXXVIII* (Hilversum, 2004), pp. 315–20, describes and analyses Diederik's role in this war, the so-called Loonse Oorlog (1203–5).

¹³ J.L. van der Gouw, *Everwach; De rentmeester van de bisschop van Utrecht. Een verhaal uit het begin van de dertiende eeuw* (Hilversum, 1984); review by J. Verbij-Schillings, 'De helletocht van Everwach', *Madoc. Tijdschrift over de Middeleeuwen* 9–1 (1995), pp. 52–4. J. van Moolenbroek, *Mirakels historisch. De exempels van Caesarius van Heisterbach over Nederland en Nederlanders*. *Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen deel LXV* (Hilversum, 1999), pp. 222–34, takes pains to trace the historical Everwach (at pp. 231–3).

There is an important phrase to the effect that the debt to the Roman and Sienese creditors was discharged *simul et semel*.¹⁴ Van Rij translated this as ‘in one stroke’, suggesting that only one payment took place. The papal letters suggest that the debt was reduced in phases rather than in only one shipment. Thus, an alternative and preferable translation of *simul et semel* in this case is ‘once and for all’.

COINS OR INGOTS?

Having established that the *Narracio* is a reasonably reliable source in matters of finance, we now turn to our main question: what was meant with the *marce sterlingorum* that the bishop of Utrecht had produced? There are two possible answers: short-cross pennies, or silver ingots of sterling fineness. According to Peter Spufford, around 1200 the English penny, which was commonly called ‘sterling’, had acquired a strong reputation and circulated widely in continental Europe. ‘It was presumably in this period that ‘sterling’ became attached to a fineness of silver in ingot form, although we have no direct evidence of the use of the word until 1274’.¹⁵ This evidence comes from Venice, where bars of silver of sterling fineness were cast.¹⁶ Spufford also mentions an Italian source from 1265 and writes that ‘probably at this date, sterling by the mark meant ingots of silver of sterling fineness, not English coin’.¹⁷

The possibility of Utrecht-made pennies of sterling weight and fineness appears unlikely. The most likely design would be short-cross sterlings. According to Lord Stewartby, there are a few imitations of the earliest short-cross sterlings (Classes I – IV), while there is an abundance of anonymous imitations of the Class V and VI sterlings which were first produced in 1205 and about 1209, respectively.¹⁸ Identifiable German imitations date from the 1230s, long after Van Are’s death. These closely follow the originals and may be plain forgeries rather than the product of official mints. The earliest known official German coins that were modelled after, yet do not exactly imitate, the English short-cross sterling date from before 1218 and were minted in Dortmund and Münster.¹⁹

As early as 936, the Church of Utrecht had the right to mint, although the first identifiable coins date from the reign of King Henry II (1002–24).²⁰ Mints in the diocese of Utrecht had been active for about two centuries preceding Van Are’s reign. It seems unlikely that Van Are had either deceptive imitations or sterling-like coins struck. In the first place, one would expect identifiable imitations from an established mint; secondly, the marks sterling were purpose-made for a large payment which could be expected to be checked for its weight and purity. Producing imitations can only be profitably done when the coins are sub-standard, yet this was sure to be detected in Van Are’s case. Furthermore, no coins of sterling weight of Utrecht are known, neither of Bishop Diederik van Are nor of any of his successors (the Utrecht penny during Van Are’s reign was about one third sterling weight: 0.50 grams). In the case of Van Are, this may be explained if the sterlings had been exclusively struck to pay the Italian creditors and were all melted, either directly upon arrival of the payment or in the course of time. Finally, whilst short-cross sterlings may have circulated and are mentioned

¹⁴ Van Rij, *Een verhaal over Groningen*, pp. 30–1, par. 16: 27.

¹⁵ P. Spufford, *Money and its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 219.

¹⁶ Spufford, *Money and its Use*, p. 218.

¹⁷ Spufford, *Money and its Use*, p. 113, note 3.

¹⁸ Lord Stewartby, ‘German imitations of English short-cross sterlings’, *NC* 155 (1995), pp. 209–60. Cf. P. Berghaus, ‘Die Perioden des Sterlings in Westfalen, dem Rheinland und in den Niederlanden’, *HBV* 1 (1947), pp. 34–53, for an earlier view.

¹⁹ P. Berghaus, *Dortmunder Geldgeschichte* (Dortmund 1958), pp. 17–18 and P. Ilisch, *Die mittelalterliche Münzprägung der Bischöfe von Münster* (Münster 1994), pp. 70–2.

²⁰ P. Ilisch, ‘Utrecht 10.1’, ‘Die Münzprägung im Herzogtum Niederlothringen’, *JMP* 84–85 (1997–8), p. 131.

in Cologne around the year 1200,²¹ the numismatic evidence suggests that these were less common in the Netherlands. Only six short-cross sterlings are reported in NUMIS, the on-line registration system of Dutch coin finds.²² Two of these were found together, the others were stray finds. Furthermore, they were not represented in the large hoard found at Arnhem in 1950 and concealed around 1190,²³ nor in any other Dutch or Rhineland hoard of the period.

As ingots were common and convenient for large long-distance transactions and because striking coin, which requires dies, was more expensive than casting ingots, it is much more plausible that ingots were used for the payment(s). Striking bullion into coin would have involved a considerable amount of additional work and expenses which, it would appear from the circumstances, was totally unnecessary. The choice for Vollenhove may then also be explained. Casting ingots is considerably easier than striking coin, and does not require a fully equipped workshop. Minting would normally have been conducted in one of the bishop's mints, i.e. Deventer and Utrecht. Unlike Vollenhove, these were not located by the sea and were thus at a disadvantage from a logistical perspective. Transporting considerable sums to Flanders was probably much safer by sea than (wholly or partially) over land.

This raises the question to what extent casting ingots, of sterling or other fineness, rather than striking coin was a common practice in the Low Countries around 1200. There is limited archaeological evidence from the Viking age that ingots were used and perhaps even produced in that area. Two casting moulds of presumably Norwegian origin, re-used as fishing utensils, were uncovered in the trading towns Dorestad and Tiel in a tenth century context, as well as one single ingot with cutmarks and traces of testing in Warffum (province of Groningen, Frisia).²⁴ The Dutch database of archaeological finds ARCHIS only contains files on early medieval ingots; no finds are known from later periods.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear from various contemporary documents that ingots were used in Flanders in the last third of the twelfth century and the first half of the thirteenth century, and in Denmark in 1224.²⁶ The payment(s) on behalf of the bishop of Utrecht in Ypres fit(s) well in this pattern.

CONCLUSION

The phrase *marce sterlingorum* in the chronicle *Narracio* in all probability refers to ingots of sterling silver. The ingots were made in Vollenhove and were meant to pay creditors from Siena and Rome. The payment appears to have been made in several portions and took place in Ypres. In any case, one payment was made in Ypres around 1210, in between the second papal letter of 1208 and Van Are's death in 1212.

If our interpretation is correct, the *Narracio* provides documentary evidence for the production of sterling ingots which predates the earliest known reference in Spufford by over 60 years. Furthermore, it indicates that Utrecht was already, around 1200, connected to an extensive financial network the centre of which was the fairs system of Flanders.

²¹ J.P. Huffmann, *Family, Commerce, and Religion in London and Cologne. Anglo-German emigrants, c.1000-c.1300* (Cambridge, 1998), at pp. 41–63.

²² See www.geldmuseum.nl, NUMIS; as of 8 August 2007.

²³ H.E. van Gelder, 'Vondst van 12^{de}-eeuwse munten te Arnhem', *JMP* 67 (1980), pp. 107–36.

²⁴ J.C. Besteman, 'Scandinavisch gewichtsgeld in Nederland in de Vikingperiode', in E.H.P. Cordfunke and H. Sarfatij (eds.), *Van Solidus tot Euro; Geld in Nederland in economisch-historisch en politiek perspectief* (Hilversum, 2004), pp. 21–42 at pp. 28–30.

²⁵ We thank Jan Besteman (University of Amsterdam), Fred Brounen (Rijksdienst voor Archeologie, Cultuurlandschap en Monumenten) and Arent Pol (Geldmuseum) for their assistance.

²⁶ Spufford, *Money and its Use*, pp. 209–24, at pp. 212–3 note 6 and p. 214, respectively.